

“Oh Borderline”: Joni Mitchell’s Aging Voice as a Site of Queer Resistance

Emily Baker

In late 2002, aged 59 years old, Joni Mitchell released *Travelogue*,¹ a double album of self-penned songs from her three decades of music-making. Before we hear a note, we see Mitchell’s latest self-portrait: half-smiling, she peers out of a mottled shadow through curls of smoke that look as though they could twist out of the frame altogether. Presented in a thick-rimmed gold frame, the self-portrait is set against a yellow background—implying a picture in an exhibition, a past master of popular music. As the name suggests, *Travelogue*’s visual promise concerns the passing of time, a reflective and nostalgic take on Mitchell’s musical journey across the decades. In her musical realization of that promise, Mitchell set down her alternatively tuned guitar and picked up a collaborative relationship with arranger Vince Mendoza. Backed by a swooning 71-piece orchestra playing in a grand, symphonic jazz style, *Travelogue* and its predecessor *Both Sides Now*² are part of a swathe of millennium-era pop/jazz crossover albums (Parsonage 2004, 60–80). *Both Sides Now* was a carefully curated collection of jazz standards and torch songs. It also included renditions of two of her most popular songs “A Case of You” and (of course) “Both Sides, Now.” It was a commercial hit, simultaneously casting Mitchell as a jazz diva/crooner and aligning her self-penned songs with the Great American Songbook. And yet, when Mitchell and Mendoza turned their attention solely to her back-catalog, *Travelogue* was considered too risky a release by her long-serving label, Reprise Records.

The problem for Reprise was that the repertoire operated only in part as a greatest hits record—the songs that featured on *Travelogue* had had varying success in the first place. Ultimately unconvinced of the premise, they refused

to release it and, as they handed distribution and marketing duties over to sister company Nonesuch Records, Mitchell was furious:

I'm quitting after this because the business has made itself so repugnant to me [. . .] they're not looking for talent, they're looking for a look and a willingness to cooperate. And a woman my age, no matter how well preserved, no longer has the look. And I've never had a willingness to cooperate.³

As she saw it, *Travelogue* was as musically adept as anything else she had previously released; part of her continuing artistic journey. But some critics heard it as the end of the creative line—bemoaning the palpable *pastness* of a record so saturated with memory that it “sagged under the weight of its own reflection,”⁴ while others wrote with faint praise that *Travelogue* was “terminally civilized.”⁵ Put bluntly, at best Mitchell and Mendoza's collaboration was heard as coproduced eulogy. At worst, it was lambasted for being an “overdressed [. . .] vanity project.”⁶ In the *New York Times*, John Rockwell wrote, frustratedly, that the willful experimentation that characterized Mitchell's back-catalog had been exchanged for a saccharine nostalgia in *Travelogue*. For Rockwell, the album might well appeal to the most loyal fans as a means of clinging to the memories of a shared musical past. But he describes and explains her diminished vocal range and softer, more muted tone as evidence that Mitchell had capitulated to the kind of conservatism which is unproblematically perceived as synonymous with aging. Matthew Gilbert supports this view, describing the performative effects of *Travelogue*: “It's Joni somewhere between Broadway and Bach [. . .] It's theatrical, it's grandiose, and it's not the Joni Mitchell I want to hear unless I'm looking for distraction in a dentist's waiting room.”⁷ Gilbert's scorn gestures toward the repeated leaps of faith that Mitchell has encouraged and engendered in her fans across the course of her career but suggests that *Travelogue* marks the end of his confidence in her creative innovation. For both critics, Mitchell's early catalog is the place to hear the *real* Mitchell, by which they mean a suitably inventive one. Indeed, Rockwell goes as far as to suggest that we abandon the twenty-first-century aging star altogether and head to downtown Manhattan for an all-the-queerer (and ostensibly more *authentic*) experience: drag artist John Kelly's countertenor performances

of Mitchell's career-defining albums, *Ladies of the Canyon*, *Blue, Court and Spark*, and *Hejira*.⁸

In this chapter, I argue against the idea that Mitchell's subversive streak can only be detected in her youthful soprano, suggesting that this misses both the point and potential of her twenty-first-century musical output. While others have closely analyzed the nuances and effects of Mitchell's voice as it carries the textures of age, time, and experience (Apolloni 2016; Elliott 2015), I suggest that these affective textures challenge sociocultural assumptions about the perceived norms and capabilities of older people. I argue that *Travelogue's* broad premise is a queer one: to rearrange, reframe, and reimagine the constituent elements of popular music. Mitchell's aging (and therefore non-normative) voice challenges an ageist status quo that says that she should retreat and retire from public view as she ages. Further still, I assert that the very act of singing constitutes a mode of queerness: with Mitchell's voice expressing a still-active sensuality, a desire deemed highly inappropriate for a woman her age.

My attention is particularly caught by *Travelogue's* "Borderline," a song that appeared originally only eight years before *Travelogue*, on the Grammy award-winning pop/rock album *Turbulent Indigo*.⁹ Mitchell has explained that it is a song which is concerned with "roads, fences," adding that "they're like cholesterol in the arteries [. . .] everybody seems to love to draw these lines. So, as we come to this millennium, everyone's a divisionist in some way."¹⁰ "Borderline" is a musical meditation on the way we generate categories to define ourselves. Partitioning along differences in gender, nation, class, race, and age, Mitchell sings about how these boundaries are silently, routinely, and problematically inculcated within culture. In this way, it is a song which arrives readymade as a call to arms for the queer project: to critique and interrogate identity categories (Jagose 1996; Sullivan 2003).

The chapter follows a two-part structure: first, I argue that the *Travelogue* version of "Borderline," which switches from mid-90s rock to millennium-jazz, draws attention to the mechanics and rules of genre. In this way, I argue that Mitchell's queerness comes through her systematic undoing of vocal, musical, and cultural norms. In the second part, I tune in to the specifics of Mitchell's vocal performance and examine how interplaying vocal colors often compete with and contradict each other. I pay particular attention to the way that, in

“Borderline,” a flighty “featheriness” contrasts with a guttural “cragginess” and argue that both sounds communicate the kind of desire that destabilizes the idea that the aging female body is a sexless body.

From *Turbulent Indigo* to *Travelogue*

Upon its release in 1994, *Rolling Stone* magazine celebrated *Turbulent Indigo* as Mitchell’s best album since the mid-1970s and made the connection between its intense sadness, Mitchell’s history as the pin-up “confessional” singer-songwriter and her disintegrating marriage to *Turbulent Indigo*’s coproducer, Larry Klein.¹¹ On the record, Mitchell looks in from the outside: at love, sociocultural hierarchies, politics, power structures, and the banal quotidian. Writing in *Time* magazine, Guy Garcia remarked that *Turbulent Indigo* was drenched in Mitchell’s musical idiolect, with “crystalline arrangements; unorthodox guitar tunings; the fluid, bittersweet melodies”¹² and celebrated her return to commercial form.

On the *Turbulent Indigo* version of “Borderline,” the elements of the song broadly adhere to the norms of rock music, but with Mitchell’s musical quirks intact. She communicates a sense of loneliness through a jittery guitar groove, while a yearning pedal steel reaches up and out to a rumbling bass guitar. Later, an otherworldly synthesizer enters the fray, howling from the stratosphere. It is an arrangement which leaves space for her biting lyrics. To be sure, Mitchell’s brand of rocky authenticity is characterized by these musical signifiers—where the parameters of the genres are broadly adhered to but actively stretched. In an interview, she describes *Turbulent Indigo*’s to-ing, fro-ing, pushing and pulling of musical categories as part of her larger feeling of musical homelessness; of being without a musical lineage and of being repeatedly pushed out of proliferating genres.¹³ Of course, the irony here is that, for all her talk of being repeatedly and routinely (self-) cast as the outsider, *Turbulent Indigo* was celebrated by precisely those industry insider voices that Mitchell claims to have been rejected by. In other words, for all its peculiarities, *Turbulent Indigo* was the mark of Mitchell being assimilated *back* into a musical mainstream that she had both resisted and been excluded from since the 1970s.

Four years later, change was afoot again as she sought to distance herself from the established orthodoxies of popular music.¹⁴ Now aged 55, the question of stopping work was repeatedly put to Mitchell, especially given the context of her Grammy success. For some, her chronological age represented a timely opportunity to gracefully bow out on a commercial and critical career high. With her orchestral phase on the horizon, Mitchell refused the idea of quitting altogether but intimated that certain fetishized musical idiosyncrasies from her past were to fall by the wayside. In an interview from this period, she snaps: her voice had changed significantly, her old guitar style was now "completely foreign to [her and she had] no idea how [she] did it."¹⁵ Further still, she explains a relationship with her songs which is entirely anti-nostalgic. Instead of rose-tinted reflection, Mitchell treats her repertoire as a place for constant (re)interpretation and experimentation. She says: "I never wanted to be a human jukebox [. . .] I think more like a film or dramatic actress and a playwright. Those plays are more suitable to me. I feel miscast in my early songs. They are ingénue roles."¹⁶ Mitchell's notion of her "miscasting" subverts the popular association of authenticity and "rightness" with the younger, rather than the older performance (think of the common accusation that "heritage acts" have "lost it"—a phrase that suggests that the earlier performance by the younger self is more "real"—and the aging performer little more than a faded facsimile).

Travelogue is a collection of handpicked and perhaps unlikely songs to get the orchestral treatment. With the repertoire set, a wholesale alteration of the arrangement of each song enabled Mitchell to enact an entirely different kind of vocal performance. The dramatic reworkings convey similar cultural work as a cover version but instead of passing the song between artists (with different identity markers impressed on the song in the process), Mitchell's self-cover highlights the change in her body and voice (Griffiths 2002, 51–64; Plasketes 2013, 11–39). Some of the songs are entirely transformed in terms of vocal pitch and phrasing. But what is interesting about "Borderline" is that the key remains the same, which suggests little deterioration to Mitchell's range in the short time between the two releases. And yet, "Borderline" is transformed in its newly orchestrated state. The process behind this reframing warrants further investigation.

The Mendoza effect

Vince Mendoza's ambitious and expansive arrangements are central to *Travelogue's* sound. He draws inspiration from a diverse and eclectic range of stylistic references: from master jazz orchestrator Gil Evans to the Romantic grandeur of Johannes Brahms; from the complex and varied musical forms of Igor Stravinsky to the avant-garde rhythmic and harmonic complexity of György Ligeti.¹⁷ The resulting aesthetic is rich and celebrated by some for being "impeccably tasteful"¹⁸ and nothing short of "a miracle."¹⁹ But, as noted earlier, others were less convinced. Writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, Robert Hilburn says that although "the overall effect is liberating and revealing"²⁰ the album feels rather "strained"²¹—suggesting that Mitchell's (in)famous subversive streak was being tamed by Mendoza's maneuvering of the orchestra and that Mendoza was, in effect, straightening up Mitchell's tempestuous musical history. An adjustment like Mendoza's could well be perceived as a negation of Mitchell's willful and persistent challenges to pop music trends, norms, and expectations. On *Travelogue*, she may well appear to surrender her agency as songwriter, arranger, and guitarist in exchange for Mendoza's touch. Indeed, it is easy to read Mitchell's metamorphosis between *Turbulent Indigo* and *Travelogue* from rock to jazz; from an electric band to "acoustic" orchestra; from the more masculine rock star to feminine jazz diva as an indicator of her impending withdrawal from the music scene. After all, as Catharine Parsonage notes in her exploration of singers who swing into jazz from pop "[it offers a] . . . neutralizing, cleansing function as the musical material is specifically located away from the rock world" (2004, 5–6).

Certain critics perceived *Travelogue* as Mitchell's swan song, that ostensibly "seem[ed] to wave goodbye with every visual and aural offering" (Smith 2004, 97). Mendoza's orchestration casts a moody grandeur, seeming to neutralize Mitchell's capricious life-journey and preparing her for a dignified death. Indeed, for all her protestations of being "unwilling to cooperate," this shift could easily be perceived as Mitchell's finally yielding to the sociocultural requirement to age appropriately according to her gender, adhering to a normative narrative of growing old gracefully and quietening with age (Dolan and Tincknell 2012; Dolan 2014, 342–351).

But what I want to suggest is that Mitchell is overtly aware of the kind of gravitas, maturity and “certain sort of musical artistic purity” that orchestral instruments carry in contemporary culture, and she looks to invert their connotations (Redhead in Moore 2012, 263). Chris Jones writes that *Travelogue* is representative of Mitchell’s belief that “older forms such as jazz or classical [music] equate to more serious vehicles for her dissections of modern America.”²² And though Jones deems this a “specious philosophy,”²³ Mitchell’s carefully curated and unusual track-listing troubles the normative constituent elements of repertoire and performance style. As I hear it, dissidence is her intention. This is especially clear on “Borderline,” where the song’s tooling of symphonic jazz offers an additional means of spotlighting precisely the boundaries that lyrically preoccupy Mitchell.

“Like a barbed wire fence”: the gradual transgression of rhythmic borderlines

The rhythmical reconfiguration of “Borderline” for *Travelogue* is dramatic, with Mitchell’s idiomatic, driving, percussive guitar exchanged for a jazz-inflected *paso doble*. The *paso doble*’s groove has a distinctly macho history with its roots in bullfighting. By slowing the song’s tempo from the original recording, Mendoza and Mitchell assert this overtly masculine rhythmical framework to represent a particular kind of Eurocentric, flamboyant, and hegemonically masculine showmanship. The *paso doble*’s neat and strict boundary provides space for Mitchell to be free with her vocal phrasing—playing cat and mouse with the orchestra with each passing bar—through and between the lines which carve up and delineate time.

In 2014, Mitchell outlined how her creative philosophy “always contained the question of how far the pop song could go. What themes it could hold without collapsing.”²⁴ And so, it is significant that, over the course of “Borderline,” the rigidity of the *paso doble* is pushed to the point of disintegration. Toward the end, a series of drum kit flourishes twist around descending flute chirrup while snarling brass—bolstered by double bass and cello—provide a springboard for violins to soar and swoop out toward the horizon. All the while, Mitchell’s

voice acts as the matador, with every breath and vocal melody teasing the symphonic jazz orchestra.

The (queer) mechanics of the voice

Roland Barthes's famous theory of the "grain" of the voice is a useful tool to try and pin down the nuances of vocal performance. He argued that musicologists were overly obsessed with the idea of good vocal performance being bound up in the singer's adherence to both the musical text and the historical conventions of singing. For Barthes, musicologists had failed to recognize the embodied element of singing. He offers the grain as a solution. "The 'grain,'" he explains, "is the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs" (Barthes 1977). It is a mode of listening that encourages us to go deeper. For Barthes, the meaning of a vocal performance lies in the enunciation and diction of the performer; teeth that clatter and whistle as lyrics spill from the singer's mouth; vocal sounds that resonate through the skull or that seem to emanate from the gut. What the grain offers the listener is a means of describing the visceral response we might have to a vocal performance.

On "Borderline," it is as if Mitchell and Barthes are in conversation. In "Borderline," Mendoza's orchestrations provide not just a musical *context*—but the sonic *space* to focus the listener on Mitchell's grain. Barthes claims that the voice has the capacity to move the listener: it "sways us to *jouissance*."²⁵ As I listen, I am wooed by a palette of vocal colors that evoke Mitchell's body. In an age-phobic society, this is a subversive move: gesturing to the older Mitchell's still-active desires, wants and needs expressed lyrically, materially and performatively. "Borderline" is a particularly disorientating listening experience, with Mitchell's lyrical sniping delivered through a grain that simultaneously sashays and shivers. Her vocal performance speaks of, for and from bodies ordinarily excluded from the youthful, sensual expressions of popular music.

The relationship between body and voice is explored by Steven Connor in his idea of the "vocalic body" (2000). While his theory mostly concerns the practice of ventriloquism, Connor's work is a useful tool to examine the singing voice. He writes that, of course, bodies produce voices, but that the

reverse is true too: when we hear a voice, it creates the shape of the body it has come from:

the vocalic body is the idea—which can take the form of a dream, fantasy, ideal, theological doctrine, or hallucination—of a surrogate or secondary body, a projection of a new way of having or being a body, formed and sustained out of the autonomous operations of the voice. (Connor 2000, 34)

And so, the vocalic body speaks of the shape, size, ability, class, gender, race, ethnicity, and age of the speaker or singer. On “Borderline,” Mitchell’s vocalic body is the Other to pop music’s dominant industry processes and youth-soaked popular sounds. As I will explore, hers is a voice of competing and contradictory vocal timbres: where notes sometimes hang heavily only to be transformed and countered by a melodic fragility. I suggest this is a deliberate strategy, that Mitchell is queering cultural expectations of the pop star by amplifying her aging (and therefore non-normative) vocalic body.

When a not-quite-but-almost 60-year-old woman steps in front of a microphone, the body which is routinely encoded as being both conceptually and materially abject, is caught in the sensual act of singing. Mitchell’s voice evokes a complex sexuality through a queer sound; her ambiguous vocal timbre (which I will discuss in more detail, shortly) confuses perceptions of the voice as a fixed identity marker (Jarman-Ivens 2011). It is, I suggest, this vocal ambiguity that produces the intrigue in Mitchell’s performance of “Borderline.” In it, Mitchell *undoes* the conventions of popular music. What characterizes Mitchell’s queer grain is a paradoxical composite of effects and techniques, where Mitchell’s voice is as “craggy” as it is “breathy.”

“The craggy alto”

The majority of the reviews of *Both Sides Now* and *Travelogue* foregrounded Mitchell’s age, with a particular emphasis on the decreased mobility of that once-elastic soprano. For example, *The Scotsman* described her delivery as an “inert” performance that seemed to “iron out the idiosyncrasies”²⁶ of her voice. However, fans were more forgiving—one writes that although her “range is somewhat diminished [. . .], her voice remains a fine instrument

for carrying the burden of her songs.”²⁷ Either way, Mitchell’s vocal delivery in *Both Sides Now* and *Travelogue* was a jolt to many. Writing in the *New York Times*, Stephen Holden reflects on a live performance of “Both Sides, Now,” saying that:

Few contemporary voices have aged more shockingly than Joni Mitchell’s. The craggy alto [. . .] is so changed from the sweetly yodeling folk soprano of her earliest albums that it hardly seems possible that the two sounds could have come from the same body.²⁸

Such *cragginess* provides a challenge for Holden, who positions Mitchell’s “ingénue” voice as her “real” voice and her older voice as the imposter. The ambiguities of Mitchell’s voice are especially pertinent here: youthful vocalizations, so often posited as the epitome of whimsical femininity, haunt their opposite—the “craggy alto”—a deeper, and therefore more masculine voice. These vying vocalic bodies trouble the neat, collective cultural memory of “Joni Mitchell.” This, perhaps, provides an explanation for Reprise Records’ anxiety about marketing *Travelogue* and its consequent lukewarm critical reception. Mitchell’s cragginess draws our attention to the voice’s gendered performativity of the voice, with her lowered range and a brushed timbre signifying the sonic markers of age.

The notion of “cragginess” is, in part at least, to do with vocal range. Listening to Joni Mitchell’s performance of “Borderline,” the listener might recall and attempt to reconstruct the famous soprano chirruping of the early 1970s, through the craggy lines. But Mitchell has repeatedly denied *being* a soprano and described her early-career voice as a performative trick—nothing more than the calculated mimicry of vocal inflections that would afford her cigarettes and movie tickets, little luxuries that supplemented her thrifty life as an art student (Henderson 2005; Monk 2012). In an interview with National Public Radio, she disparagingly calls her 1970s voice her “little helium voice”²⁹ and explains a symbiotic relationship between repertoire and voice. She describes how songs were crafted to foreground her high-pitched voice but that, over time, “things conspired to rob [her] of it.”³⁰ In Mitchell’s typically cryptic and contradictory style, just what those “things” are: whether the realities of age gradually creeping up on the body, or hedonism, is left

unsaid. In the context of a quasi-greatest hits album like *Travelogue*, songs taken from Mitchell’s 1990s output are not primarily haunted by Mitchell’s “helium voice”—they arrive already “robbed” of that—but her performance is certainly *craggier* than even its slightly earlier iterations. Yet the cragginess of her performance is counterbalanced by another quality which foregrounds the affective power of the breath.

“Feathery lines”

Throughout her singing career, Mitchell has experimented with the affective qualities of breath. Talking to Malka Marom, she discusses her signature vibrato sound—where the note just “disintegrate[s], just peter[s] out.” Mitchell depicts these sounds as the aural expression of her visual artistic practice, calling them her “feathery lines” (Marom 2014, 228). In this way, we can think of her “feathery lines” as the sonic equivalent of the brush being pulled over the canvas as she paints (Marom 2014, 4).

Reviews of *Travelogue* called the intentionality of these “feathery lines” into question, with critics suggesting that Mitchell’s ailing health was responsible for her apparent diminished levels of vocal control. A committed smoker, Mitchell’s voice is routinely discussed in reference to the habit’s effect on her voice. But where it is noted for having “taken on a smoky flavor”³¹ and therefore a sense of rocky authenticity on *Turbulent Indigo*, Mitchell’s voice and repertoire on *Travelogue* left critics astonished. In the *Guardian*, Betty Clarke writes that the album could function as a health warning on account of the “nicotine-ravaged vocals of the once angelic, now gasping Joni Mitchell.”³²

Even the most positive of reviews alludes to Mitchell’s smoking. Writing about *Travelogue* in the *Jazz Times*, Christopher Loudon says:

Tough as it is to rationalize, Joni Mitchell’s pack-a-day habit seems only to have enriched that exquisite voice of hers. On this, her first album for Nonesuch and second, after the jazz-infused *Both Sides Now*, with the London Symphony Orchestra, Mitchell’s nicotine-stained throatiness shapes a vaguely melancholy sagacity that is stunningly beautiful.³³

In the time between the two recordings of “Borderline,” there was an apparent shift in Mitchell’s attitude toward her own voice in relation to smoking. Back in 1994, she poured tea during an interview with *Rolling Stone* and described her smoking as a “bad habit.”³⁴ In early interviews for *Travelogue* she admitted to still not taking good care of her voice—blaming a combination of smoking and excessive talking for her vocal changes.³⁵ But increasingly, Mitchell became defensive around those who criticized her voice, who implied that those “feathery lines” demonstrated a lack of vocal control, and ultimately called into question her artistry. When journalist Neil McCormick suggested that her years of smoking had finally caught up with her Mitchell retorted: “I have smoked since I was nine, so obviously it didn’t affect my early work that much.”³⁶ Elsewhere, she has suggested that her altered voice is simply the “natural” result of the processes of aging (Monk 2012; Marom 2014). In 2007, Mitchell reflected on *Travelogue* in a promotional interview for what really would be her final release of new material (to date), *Shine*.³⁷ In it, she sidesteps the question of smoking in favor of a discourse on vocal health, claiming that a diagnosis of vocal cord lesions, nodules, and a compressed larynx was actually the cause of such a breathy tone on *Travelogue*,³⁸ symptoms which caused the “feathery lines” to appear more frayed than ever. It is difficult, if not impossible, to prove the extent to which these medical problems demonstrate the universal, “natural,” material realities of aging and what may have functioned as a symptom accelerator. Regardless, what *is* interesting is the sociocultural effects generated by the breathy, aging singer. As Susan Fast notes, “breathiness is associated with sexual availability or arousal, or with submissiveness [. . .] and so often with the feminine” (Jennex 2013, 355). In this way, Mitchell’s “feathery lines” produce an active, aging sensuality and therefore a queer sensuality—a sensuality being produced from a body outside of the socially sanctioned norm.

As I have noted, Mendoza’s *paso doble* gradually unravels, hinting at Mitchell’s aging sexuality as it rocks and rolls. But it is through the featheriness of her voice that this sexuality is truly felt. “Feathery lines” are problematic in a culture where sexuality, femininity, and expressions of desire are deemed to be exclusively for the young. In refusing to adhere to the sociocultural requirement to quieten with age, Mitchell rattles the bars of the heterosexual matrix of sex, gender, and sexuality that silently maintain the power of the

patriarchy (Butler 1993, 1999; Carrera, DePalma, and Lameiras 2012; Swinnen and Port 2012; Tretheway 2001). "Feathery lines" operate as a queer, naughty disturbance, with Mitchell's aging voice lightly brushing, caressing, and softly touching the listener (Barthes 1977, 179; Bonenfant 2010, 74–80).

On *Travelogue*, through a mix of both orchestral arrangement and recording processes, the listeners' attention is drawn to the corporeal processes that generate the singing voice. As Alexandra Apolloni notes, "Mitchell's voice is miked so that it integrates seamlessly into the lush orchestration. Her singing is rich and smooth, and the way she leans into notes sounds wistful and nostalgic" (2016). As I hear it, Mitchell's vocal performance on *Travelogue* utilizes the technologies of the crooner so that both her "craggy alto" and her "feathery lines" are front and center.

Crooner technologies

Developed in the 1920s, the crooning style was a result of engineers and studio technicians developing microphones that would help popular singers fill a concert hall over and above the accompanying orchestra. The sensitivity of these newly-invented gadgets was remarkable, with the voice heard up-close and more personally than ever before (Baade 2012; Jarman-Ivens 2011; McCracken 2001). It was a style that made stars of Bing Crosby, Rudy Vallee, Frank Sinatra, and Perry Como, singers who learnt to foreground the grain of the voice, whispering in the listener's ear, with the microphone magnifying every intimate croak and crackle. Crooners wooed the listener with sentimental songs about love and longing—velvet voices that "promised the odours, textures and warmth of another body" (Connor 2000, 38). While crooning was not exclusively a male mode of performance (like its female equivalent "torch singing"), the style of performance, its repertoire, and cultural effects are often received along gendered lines. As Christina Baade outlines in "Victory through Harmony" (2012), the arousing qualities of the crooner's voice led to the BBC banning their records from the airwaves during the Second World War. The crooner was considered a dangerous distraction for women who, whether in the munitions factory or at home caring for the

family, might be seduced by the fleshy tones of the singer. The BBC felt that the crooner threatened the concentration of the Allied war effort, armed with a voice that wooed, and sonically troubled the stability of the family unit. Over time, the crooner's subversive power has been erased, replaced by a cultural sense of the crooner's voice as conveying a rather naff mawkishness. The crooner's voice has come to be associated with a soft effeminacy, at odds with culturally sanctioned masculinity.

It is significant then, that Mitchell singles out the songs and style of the crooner era as a key source of inspiration for her later work.³⁹ Performing in this style, she subverts the gendered conventions of the genre and suggests that the crooner's dulcet tones contain something far more radical than first meets the ear. In deliberately harnessing the crooner's non-normative masculinity, Mitchell pulls on a history which stars one of the most improbably subversive figures in popular music. By crooning, Mitchell employs vocal techniques and technologies which sonically magnify her "feathery cragginess." Every melodic sigh, croak, stumble, and rhythmic crackle functions as a signifier of her aging, sensual body, so often marked as abject in a youth-obsessed culture. Mitchell queerly and boldly embodies this Otherness. "Borderline" is thematically antithetical to the kind of lovelorn whimsy of the crooner and yet it jumps into the style with both feet.

Conclusion

Between *Turbulent Indigo* and *Travelogue*, the transformation of Mitchell's vocal style and timbre is remarkable. In collaboration with Vince Mendoza, she abandons her iconic guitar playing in order to sonically fix the listener's ear to the nuances of her vocal performance. A cloak of conservatism might appear to drape itself over her orchestral phase but as I hear it, on "Borderline" especially, the message of the record is clear. This is not a musical taming. Rather it is a way of highlighting the enormity of the normalized processes, practices, bodies, and voices that govern us all. The later "Borderline" undoes norms through the subversive complexities of Mitchell's vocal technique and its surprising reframing of the earlier version. Mendoza puts well-established

musical histories to work, using the trope of the *paso doble* to emphasize the rigidity of the organized structures that control Western culture. Then Mitchell's voice enters the frame—rough and ragged—a carefully timed performance which gradually builds in intensity and begins to obfuscate the clarity of this trope. It is in this way that her performance invites a queer reading, especially on a song like "Borderline," which is concerned with the way difference is used as a tool for division. Mitchell's inconsistent vocal timbres, speak of and for bodies which are ordinarily excluded from the youth-focused parameters of popular music. Armed with the qualities of age, time, and experience, her voice demonstrates how aging processes contain extraordinary queer potential: still-active; out there in the world; bold and whispering; and full of wants and needs.

In 1994, Mitchell was asked about her feelings on getting older, about the material realities of aging and how it might have an effect on future music-making. She responded by pointing toward the vagaries of it all, "[it's] like Neil [Young] says, 'it's better to burn out than to rust.' Well, I don't want to burn out, and I don't want to rust! There must be a third choice."⁴⁰ Looking back at the cover of *Travelogue*, Mitchell's smoky and enigmatic self-portrait points toward her alternative to Young's dichotomy, a queer method that undoes the taken-for-grantedness of age and its processes.

Notes

- 1 Joni Mitchell, *Travelogue* (New York: Nonesuch, 2002).
- 2 Joni Mitchell, *Both Sides Now* (Hollywood: Reprise Records, 2000).
- 3 James Reginato, "The Diva's Last Stand," *W Magazine* (December 2002). <http://jonimitchell.com/library/view.cfm?id=1025> (accessed: January 6, 2017).
- 4 Jim Fusilli, "Review: *Travelogue*, All Things Considered" (December 26, 2002). <http://jonimitchell.com/library/print.cfm?id=1080> (accessed: January 6, 2017).
- 5 "Rock and Pop: A Dream Falls Flat," *The Scotsman* (November 22, 2002). <https://www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/culture/music/rock-and-pop-a-dream-falls-flat-1-629680> (accessed: January 6, 2017).
- 6 John Rockwell, "Joni Mitchell's Long and Restless Journey," *New York Times* (January 5, 2003). <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/01/05/arts/music-joni-mitchell-s-long-and-restless-journey.html> (accessed: January 10, 2017).

- 7 Matthew Gilbert, "Joni Mitchell: *Travelogue*," *The Boston Globe* (November 19, 2002). <http://jonimitchell.com/library/view.cfm?id=984> (accessed: January 10, 2017).
- 8 Rockwell, "Joni Mitchell's Long and Restless Journey."
- 9 Joni Mitchell, *Turbulent Indigo* (Hollywood: Reprise Records, 1994).
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